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Father Kallistratos Glavas: A Christmas at Sea

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In 1915, Father Kallistratos Glavas (1873-1948) shared a remarkable Christmas with the passengers and crew of the SS *Thessaloniki*. While most early priests in America were appointed by the Holy Synod of Greece or the Ecumenical Patriarchate, or were invited by a parish, he had come to join his brother, George, who lived in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. At the time, there was no Greek Orthodox parish in the state, and Father Glavas had been kept busy ministering to the spiritual needs of the many Greeks living in the area. He would serve the Church in America until his death in 1948. With the exception of a short stay in Little Rock, Arkansas, a spot popular with older priests because of the nearby therapeutic hot springs, Father Glavas would serve in the Midwest at parishes in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

A native of the island of Zante, Father Glavas first arrived in America in April 1914. After spending a year in Iowa, Father Glavas had returned to Greece to put his affairs in order and to bring icons, vestments, and essential sacramental and liturgical objects back to America. On November 16, 1915, Father Glavas boarded the SS *Thessaloniki* in Piraeus for his return to America. The *Thessaloniki* was an older ship purchased in 1913 by the National Greek Line and refitted to carry immigrants. Among the oldest, smallest, and slowest ships of the Greek fleet, the *Thessaloniki* was certified seaworthy and had made seven transatlantic crossings without incident, but winter crossings were hazardous. Although there were accommodations for 2,000, there were only 177 passengers, along with 39 officers and crew. The ship also carried 1,200 tons of cargo, mainly cheese, olive oil, currants, and figs.

The voyage was uneventful through the Mediterranean Sea. When the ship passed Gibraltar on December 1, it was on schedule to arrive in New York on December 11. Once it reached the North Atlantic, however, everything changed. There was a succession of storms that battered the ship and slowed progress. Then, on December 21, the *Thessaloniki* encountered a hurricane. The seas broke a porthole, flooding the engine room and extinguishing the boilers. It was impossible to pump out the water. Lost at sea and listing dangerously, the crippled *Thessaloniki* was without power and at the mercy of wind and wave. Again and again it would descend into a deep trough between giant waves, only to be tossed onto a wave crest with the propellers spinning out of the water “like a pinwheel.” To make matters worse, the storm washed away some of the lifeboats.

Father Glavas was credited with keeping the passengers from panicking. He is said to have “almost continuously...worked with his people, as a shepherd works his flock, quieting them,

praying with them and comforting them.” He led them in “singing hymns while they knelt on the floor.” He even “persuaded some of the passengers to man the pumps and help the crew repair the leaks.” He buoyed their spirits and provided spiritual comfort, especially to the 45 women and 20 children on board. “Prayers were said daily and candles were burned continually upon the little shrine which was erected upon the stern under the deckhouse.”

On Christmas Day, as if in answer to their prayers, the sea calmed, the wind subsided, and the sun burst through the storm clouds. After nearly 50 days at sea, the ship was running dangerously low of food and water. For three days, water was rationed, with each person receiving one-half cup of kerosene-tainted water per day.

The plight of those on board was discussed daily in newspapers across the country, riveting public attention. Radio operators on shore and at sea tried frantically to reestablish contact. Adding further drama was the fact that this voyage was the captain’s first command.

Finally, on the morning of January 1, a rescue ship arrived. One passenger reported: “We all regarded this as an answer to our prayers and the prayers of Father Glavas. For all of us had attended services before the altar on deck, and many had not ceased praying day and night almost from the time the ship began to be in distress.” Father Glavas was one of the last passengers to board a lifeboat. The captain ordered that all baggage be abandoned. The immigrants’ lives were saved, but they lost the items they had brought with them to start a new life in the United States. Father Glavas had to leave behind sacred and liturgical objects valued at more than \$1,000. He would return to America with only one gold cross. Once the passengers were rescued, there were three unsuccessful attempts to tow the *Thessaloniki* to port. Twice the tow lines snapped, and once a stanchion was ripped from its mounting. A few days later, the crew was taken off, and the *Thessaloniki* was abandoned at sea. The engineers opened the sea cocks, and a red lantern was placed on the bridge as a warning to passing vessels. The ship was a complete loss except for 29 sacks of water-soaked mail and the two lifeboats that took the crew to safety.

The passengers arrived in South Brooklyn on January 7 after 52 harrowing days at sea. Remarkably there had been no casualties. Newspapers raised many questions about the captain’s judgment and the conduct of the crew, but there was no question that Father Glavas was a hero. His photograph appeared in papers nationwide as the priest who gave comfort and strength to his fellow passengers during the drawn-out ordeal and the memorable Christmas at sea.